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MYTHOLOGY OF LOVE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Samantha Lê

May 2011

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

MYTHOLOGY OF LOVE

by

Samantha Lê

APPROVED FOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

MYTHOLOGY OF LOVE

By Samantha Lê

This collection of love poems is divided into three parts. Section 1 is a collage, taking the reader through the moments of childhood infatuation, adult obsession, and weathered devotion. Thematically, the poems in this section, mostly confessional and persona in the form of dramatic monologues, follow a temporal and social structure. Grounded in memory, they capture a nostalgia for moments that are gone and the desire to revisit them. These poems, taking place both in the past and present, are about other people: “the others.”

Section 2 is a conversation about romantic love. Confessional and narrative in nature, these poems are more intimate and revealing, consisting of only two voices. This section captures two lives in a private dialogue. Grounded in desperation caused by their circumstances, the speakers of the poems are tending to “the self” versus “the other.” Their voices yearn for the past while they look forward to the future in order to escape the immediate present.

Section 3 consists of anti-love poems. The attempt to distance from love creates tension. From the absence of love, these poems expose the poet by tending to “the other” that is inside the poet. They highlight the poet’s life and vision. Placed in the past and present but grounded in the desire to escape from memory, this section acts as a disruption, a step back, and a step against sections one and two, against all notions love.

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“My Man Gone Now”
Bacopa (Spring 2010)

“My Man Gone Now”
San Pedro River Review (Spring 2010)

“To Myself at Nine”
Santa Clara County Poetry Gathering (Winter 2010)

“Blues Woman”
Reed Magazine (Spring 2009)

“Afternoon”
Orchard Valley Review (Spring 2009)

“Sunday Bathers”
Orchard Valley Review (Fall 2008)

“Good Intentions Are for Fools”
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PREFACE

This collection explores the various myths of love, tracing love's evolution from childhood through adulthood to old age, pausing on the significant moments that define and shape characters' lives.

This is not an attempt to define love, but instead these poems act as channels that give a multitude of voices an opportunity to flow into a common conversation about love. From teenagers falling in love and dealing with unplanned pregnancy in "We Were Fifteen," to "Esther," a poem about a woman who is haunted by the ghost of her abusive husband, to a married man who fantasizes about a woman he sees on a train in "Eastbound Train," these poems speak to the symptoms rooted in all human hearts—loneliness, fear, lust, and desperation—when these hearts are opened and made vulnerable to love.

The poems in this collection are personal in nature. In *Creating Another Self*, Samuel Maio defines the three categories of personal poetry as: confessional mode, which "relates a personal incident of the poet's public self [...] as a means of self-identification or self-definition;" persona mode, "where the poet invents a character as the narrator of a personal incident;" and self-effacing mode, where "the poet attempts to depersonalize the voice of his or her public self in order to render a seemingly objective account of a personal experience (actual or invented) of that self" (26-27). A combination of persona and confessional modes are utilized throughout *Mythology of Love*.

Love is a confession. Love is personal. The characters in these poems collide with instances of love—some minute, others monumental—and consequently, are reshaped, crippled and/or uplifted by it.

To understand love's many intrinsic powers, it is necessary to examine the many myths surrounding it. According to William Packard, author of *The Poet's Dictionary*, Greek mythology is divided into three broad categories, and these categories are defined as: "1. explanations of natural phenomena and the origins of man and nature and the universe; 2. stories of quest and adventure and the agons of heroes; and 3. the psychosexual allegories of encounters between gods and mortals" (129). Similarly, this collection is also structurally divided into three sections, which loosely parallel the three categories of Greek mythology.

Section 1 consists of poems from diverse points of view that together attempt to explain the universal symptoms of love; section 2 is an agon between two central characters on their quest to hold on to the love they found in each other; and section 3 is about the poet's development of the "self" as the universal truth, creating an allegory for love.

Section 1 of *Mythology of Love* is grounded in memory. The characters in these poems are nostalgic about the moments that have already ended. They do not yearn to relive these moments again, but simply to revisit them; and in revisiting them, they construct a common language for love.

This section is made-up of a collage of stories. It takes the reader through the moments of childhood infatuation, the disturbing obsessions of adulthood, and the

weathered devotion that comes with wisdom. Temporally, the poems in this first section are placed in the past. Focusing on other people, “the others,” this section examines how other people tend to their feelings about the loves that had already happened to them and how they tend to “the others” currently in their lives. The majority of the poems in this section are written in the form of dramatic monologues.

This section relies heavily on the voices of “the others,” (i.e., the persona mode). In these persona poems, “the voice is the speaker of the poem—not necessarily the poet” (Maio 1). By speaking through “the others,” different voices are allowed to speak on the same subject, forming a more complete picture of love from all angles.

The main influence for the persona poems in this section is Ai. Ai is known for writing in the voices of very different people while staying true to their essence. By employing this methodology, Ai’s poems are able to capture truthful narratives from a wide range of speakers.

Ai also writes from a place of taboo subjects, dark emotions, and ugly human tendencies. Her characters’ ideas about love are as desperate as their lives. Showing no fear in tackling the difficult subject of human cruelty and depravity in relationship to love, Ai writes from a brave perspective. For example, in the poem “Finished” she writes, “You force me to touch/the black rubber flaps/of the garbage disposal/that is open like a mouth saying, ah./You tell me it’s the last thing I’ll feel/before I go numb” (50). Ai paints images of brutality and raw love with bold, decisive language, creating uncomfortable glimpses of reality when the line between sex and love is blurred by violence. This same approach to language and voice is employed in the poem “Esther” to

capture the character's despair about a love laced with violence that she cannot escape, even after her abusive is dead.

This first section also relies on the confessional mode—the willingness to expose the voice—channeling Anne Sexton. As a confessional poet, Sexton laments and celebrates female identity, sexuality and power by revealing painful and shocking personal details about her life. According to Sexton, “poetry should shock the senses. It should almost hurt.” (431). In “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,” Sexton openly discusses the loneliness of a woman who has lost her lover to another woman. “She took you the way a woman takes/a bargain dress off the rack/and I broke the way a stone breaks./I give back your books and fishing tack./Today’s paper says that you are wed./At night, alone, I marry the bed” (199). This same spirit of naked-truth approach is employed in one of the blues poem in this collection, “My Man Gone Now,” to express feelings of loneliness and despair resulted when the speaker of the poem loses her lover to another woman who is having his baby.

Sexton’s poems are also strengthened by their images. “Images are the heart of poetry,” says Sexton (432). Her images, like her poetry, come from the unconscious. They are raw like “the legs from Michelangelo” and surprising like “blood worn like a corsage” (432). The following lines of “In Celebration of my Uterus” jump off the page, painting an image that cannot be contained: “The never acquired,/the never seeded or unfastened,/you of the genitals I feared,/the stalk and the puppy’s breath” (181). Like Sexton, the poems in this first section depend heavily on images to give them a sense of

place and authenticity, whether a poem is confessional or persona in nature, the images relevant to the speaker's world help to create a sincere voice.

Section 2 of *Mythology of Love* is grounded in love's desperation caused by circumstances. This series of poems is comprised of a synthesis of confessional and narrative modes. The language and tone of this section are much more intimate and revealing than the previous section. Consisting of only two voices, the heartbreaks of the two speakers are captured in a private dialogue. The first voice belongs to a Marine who has deployed on tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the second voice belongs to the lover he leaves behind. The speakers in this section are trapped inside a world that only exists for them while the bigger world of war, duty, and sacrifice presses itself upon them. The speakers in this section are only able to tend to "the self" and "the only other" (i.e., the lover). As a result, the reader is given intimate access to their relationship, witnessing the characters' private struggles and innermost fears.

Some of the poems included in this section are: "Leaving Fallujah," "Why Have You Been Gone So Long?" and "Letters from Iraq." In these poems, the characters are placed in the present, but they are longing and yearning for the past, a time before they were forced apart; and the only thing they are able to do is wait as they look to the future for escape, a break from the despair brought about by the infliction of love.

This series gets its "permission" from poems in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, such as: "Man and Wife" and "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage," which are also confessional in nature. Lowell's tactics of personal pronoun subject, simple-sentence syntax, and conversational language used to create sincere voices with whom the reader

can relate and empathize is employed throughout this section. Like Lowell's collection, these poems also utilize a combination of open form and metrical verse to aid with the narrative. The organic nature of open form used in the "Sleepwalker" helps to convey the disorganized nature of troubled sleep laced with anxieties and fear experienced by the lover left behind, while the double-English-sonnet form in the poem "Why Have You Been Gone So Long?" speaks to the rigid structure of the Marine's life. The contrasting forms create a tension between the two worlds and the states of mind of the two characters.

These poems are also influenced by Lowell's use of personal details to capture the scenery and feelings of war in the poem "For the Union Dead." Instead of focusing on the big picture of war, Lowell includes images that a soldier sees on the battlefield. Details found in such lines as, "On a thousand small town New England greens,/the old white churches hold their air/of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags/quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic," scale the concept of war down to a personal level (135). Similarly, the details that are personal to the Marine and his lover are employed in order to tell a more truthful and exposing version of the bigger story of love and sacrifice as well as the confessional "self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology" (Phillips 17).

Section 3 of *Mythology of Love* is one of self-reflection. The poems in this section are anti-love poems, a contrasting approach to the poems in sections 1 and 2. This section acts as a disruption, a step back and a step against the different notions of love discussed in the previous two sections. It is the poet's step against love.

This section focuses on the poet's self definition resulting from having explored the emotions in sections 1 and 2. Grounded in both the escape from memory and discovery of the self, these poems are placed in the past and the present. They tend to "the other" that is inside the poet. This section includes childhood poems, such as "The Burial" and "That Last Day of Summer, 1983," where the poet learned her first lessons about love. It also includes poems that take place in the present, where the poet, colored by past experiences, distances herself and creates a tension through the absence of love, such as in the poems "The Golden Hour" and "Distortions." In these poems, the poet's voice struggles to define a portrait of a self through lessons of love and reaches its allegorical conclusion.

Section 3 reflects the themes of Robert Frost's poems about childhood, family life, and personal discoveries such as "Birches," which paints a picture of childhood innocence and imaginings, and "Desert Places," which speaks to a seasoned writer's feelings of loneliness in a crowded world. The construction of the poems in this section is also influenced by Frost's usage of loose metrical verse (*vers libre*) and "momentary stay against confusion." Both form and suspension, (i.e., a momentary stay against confusion), can be found in Frost's "After Apple Picking." A dramatic dialogue, this poem is written in a strange, loosely constructed blank verse. It is written mostly in iambic pentameter, but not all the lines have five feet. For example, there are twelve syllables in the first line, "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree," but there are only five stresses: "long," "point," "lad," "stick" and "tree" (207). However, in the second line, "Toward heaven still," there are only five syllables and three stresses

(“tow,” “heav” and still”) which, unlike the first line, is in a trochaic meter (207). This switch in the meter brings emphasis to the theme of suspension. And through suspension, the moment is captured, allowing the reader to focus on an important feeling or revelation that the speaker is experiencing.

The poems in this section of *Mythology of Love* also employ lines that are controlled and precise; many of the poems are written in traditional verse. The rigid construction of the lines and stanzas mirrors Frost’s attention to form and expresses the determination in the poet’s “self.” But there are also times when the “self” breaks out of the confines of the traditional forms and the ideas of the conventional line, such as in “Distortions,” and makes its own discoveries.

Frost’s conversational language also aids in creating intimacy. The reader believes and can relate to the speaker because the speaker’s diction, tone and syntax come from an authentic place. On the subject of authenticity, Frost, in his essay, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” writes: “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows” (984-986). In order to reveal the growth of the “self” in section three, this section looks to Frost to help recount memories and arrive at realizations with a strong emphasis on authenticity.

Sylvia Plath’s themes of disconnection, helplessness and depression are also relevant to the poems in this section. Plath’s willingness to rip open wounds with

ruthless yet vulnerable honesty allows the reader to sympathize with her characters without pitying them. Finding inspiration in Plath's ability to arm her characters with subtle strength, the "self" in this third section is depicted with strength and courage and not as a victim of her circumstances.

SECTION 1

This is Not a Love Poem

where I fumble with words like *baby*,
you crazy,
and *ukulele*. I won't say
the palm of my left hand yearned
for your lips while we sat wishing for traffic East on the Ventura Freeway,
or I
love you as madly as I imagine
the way a bull loves the crushed redness of the matador's cape;
these words, all words
have been spoken by others before—
I'm certain of it.
It's the past that has its hold on me.

I arrived with lost innocence, without fantasies,
without the use of clichés and sentimentality. I am free
the way that seabirds are free
to dive into the ocean after jellyfish, stretching V's across the water's surface—free
without wanting to be free.

And I have this thing called language,
but the crank for my voicebox is broken at the joint,
trapped words
like a trapped jack-in-the-box.
My aura—cherry, ginger, plum—
twisted around my ankles. An offering of faith? But you are colorblind.

Without our fantasies, what are we but naked
alone, living
an unconscious moment?

You should know I was happy
when our feet touched under the blue ocean covers—my eyes closed—
only darkness and you,
my conduit to the morning. I have nothing left
to confess. (That's a lie.)

In Summer

And I will never see your Southern California after a rainstorm:
the wet pavement where you run, flanked by constant traffic—
people leaving and coming like waking to find yourself inside a dream
that you believe for a moment is reality, only it's too sweet a reality
to remain asleep—someone whispers your name, maybe it's me:

David—

and so you wake to the routine of living, feeling a loss,
an emptiness born of existence.

And that's enough. At lunchtime,
you sit alone at your favorite taco place and think about the numbness
like your body is slowly rejecting your heart, but you can't feel it
because it happens inside where you can't pick at it. And sometimes
that's just how a life unravels after a storm.

There're children
in the park across the street from where you sleep. They were locked-in,
kept from the rain, then released into the wet wild. *David*. They're not
our children; they will never be ours.

They fill up the sad world
with their needs. They jump and swing—making themselves bigger
than their size—and cry out because they're free. Their voices
like church bells announcing prayers, fiestas and mistakes.

David.

We don't have to feed them or love them anymore. They get
so easily full just swallowing air.

David. My hair falls into your mouth.
David. My ear aches from pressing against your hard chest; I listen
for memories of the sea there: the sunset, the salt, the flat water—
where this all began. *David*. I remember purple and falling like letting go
of the swing when I am up so high I can only see the top of my toes—
my body stiff, curves into the sky. One of us has to say it first: *David*, I...
I believe.

I'm the only one. *David*. Your long fingers dig into
the small of my back. My body arches into yours—faith in pleasure,
a sacred violation. *David*. You kneel like a sinner in front of me.
You're asking... not for forgiveness; you're eating sunshine
like a blind man.

David. We're sucking in too much air.
In your kitchen—tiles on the walls, on the counter, on the floor;

lines intersecting, small crosses everywhere—we make love standing up with our clothes still on, the front door left ajar, the world gone.

Mad with hunger. *David.* Your hot kiss in my mouth. *David.* Your flesh in my hands. Hunger in everything. Hunger breeds hunger like choosing nothingness, like not waking up from a dream. *David.* We feed, not finding fullness anywhere.

Internet Love Songs

1.

I want you crazy beautiful to hear me
to notice me I want to get ripped
a six pack P90x on the TV I want my own
apartment high-speed connection sex toys
the Kit DVDs I want a freeware utility
with 450+ common problems
solved I want one of those Rabbits
I want to meet Coco Tiger Woods' wife
I want to be
a mud monkey I want my half to gain
weight lose weight get punched in the face
be spanked
yes spanked hard and again
I want you to want me
then I want you to change I want you
to be sweeter to be more beautiful when you wake up in the morning
to have better morning breath
I want candy I want a twenty-four-hour truce
during which there is no arguments no pain
I want your money your attention your time
your children your car
I want your skull
I want it
my way the best way yes! I want cake
I want a cyborg's life
I want it activated and set up the way I want it I want to believe
everything I want to do is illegal
I want to go home

2.

maybe I'm not looking in the right places maybe
I'm not dateable
lovable marriage material
that girl
the one maybe I'm not a tomato growing bum maybe I'm not
worthy or pretty or interesting maybe I'm not Asian
enough angry enough rough in bed enough
maybe I'm not even a real lesbian
maybe I'm not breathing
at the right time maybe I'm not reading the press release right
but is there really only one

way out of here
maybe I'm not looking hard enough maybe I'm not excited
about eating sandwiches at 7 a.m. maybe I'm not nuts
after all maybe I'm not above attacking children maybe I'm not turning
thirty-six tomorrow maybe I'm turning twelve
maybe I'm not changing lives but I'm painting furniture
so maybe I'm not ready
to stay away live on my own forget him
love her have sex for the last time
maybe I'm not infected but the risk is high
maybe I'm not asking
for enough money maybe I'm not a poofy dress kind of girl
maybe I'm not 100% with it
but I'm still trying maybe I'm not even
the Washington Post's target demographic
anymore
maybe I'm not ready
to give up porn but I'll try for our love
maybe I'm not single
but when my boyfriend refuses to answer the phone or my emails for weeks
I no longer consider myself committed
maybe I'm not
for you

3.
sometimes I think I give too much away think about things
that don't matter like doughnuts
that there might just be a god
why bother sometimes
I think about the cute girl who thinks she's a witch
and if she ever went all the way
to Orange County
sometimes I think that it's a shame that witchcraft is never as sexy
in real life as it is in the movies sometimes I think
my computer hates me the robot slows down
to make me angry sometimes I think we break
the crazy people on purpose that I love her
more than she loves me
that everything I know
is wrong
sometimes I think everyone is medicated except for me
half the people I know are cutting back
on red meat
sometimes I think my mother cutting back

her hair to become a nun is crazy enough
to make me crazy sometimes I think the world is lonely
sometimes
I think we're alone in the universe and sometimes
I think we're not
in either case the idea disturbs me sometimes I think
if I could just hit the lottery
I'd be alright
sometimes I think I'm a genius
then I realize the Who Wants to be a Millionaire episode is a rerun sometimes
I think
I hear my name but no one's talking about me
sometimes I think this is it nothing better from here on out
what the hell
let's get it on baby baby please?
sometimes I think she likes me sometimes not so much
sometimes I think she makes fashion choices
that she knows will hurt me
sometimes I think if I tell her stories about myself she'd say
she's never heard anything funnier
sometimes I think no one
person can meet all my needs I'm a character
in imaginary stories
told by Bill Gates' minions sometimes
I think I'd want
to be someone who owns a boat the kind of fun guy who fishes
sometimes I think I could sit on a bus and pee into a beer bottle
then pour it out the window sometimes I
think about hen's vaginas
sometimes I think
I have true love
then I catch the early flight home from Fresno
and find two guys in my walk-in closet wearing bedazzled costumes
ready to double-team my girlfriend
like a goddamn magic show

Hotbox

her wheat-toast skin with wingless angel patch squirmed
like soft pudding vanilla creamy
under playful bites

morning light waded in dew bath of promises not yet broken
teeth poked through mouths opened like manholes
her tongue kicked free
exited hotbox
scratched his without caring why

baby pack me away in your case he mouthed with urgent chalk breath
poet boy with California sky in his eyes

yolkless love sweated inside foil pockets
left warm aftertaste like seventeen-year-old nipples unfolding
like rising dough from smoke-smelling bra

he wanted her time tongue wrenching wildly
her gasping-for-air morning moment

The Outsiders

on our backs
under a purple tunnel cloud
its eye upon us
flat against the sunny
slope
of a grassy bowl
little white flowers
spring
shoulders in
bodies
heat
the sweat on our faces
warm
green smells
braided blades of grass

our bodies sink
mold to insect holes and grass
cuts
my body
heats the afternoon
your hot mouth
wants
to know
if I still remember the rain
never suspecting
what I cannot forget
and why

I have
the darkness in me
crawly things
I cannot
name
places sunlight cannot reach
your fingers
tight around my fingers
but I still drift
like a dandelion
blown

We Were Fifteen

A boy and girl went down the creek; made love
in poison oak bushes. Low-rise jeans bunched at their ankles, gasping

between hushes.

A boy and girl

went down the creek. A boy and girl went down
the creek.

A new face grew lips
while foxtails whipped.

We were fifteen, finding ourselves

taller than wild leeks. A boy and girl went down the creek.
Foxtails threw like ninja stars in foxtail wars.
Foxtails knew the secret we drowned at the muddy banks;

in a brown paper bag were screams;
we didn't believe in the American dream—

no thanks.

Golden Gate Bridge at Midnight

time to catch your ride the fog is leaving for the ocean tonight
do you remember how you waited too long
feet stuffed in life soaked boots she couldn't say
words that needed to be said disappointment pinned
on street signs black midnight hour howled secretive red panties
exposed her her nails dug into paint to steady
your fingers laced around orange cables left indentations
cable strength was not your strength

I love Jesus, but He doesn't love me tattooed

on the inside of your bottom lip where damp darkness presses
the letters rub against your teeth
had you known love had you been loved whatever
is on the bridge is up to your ankles she comes with egg shell smiles
but she walks away down the street with blind corners
long way down from here you can't believe that you aren't alone
blood in the moon blood in your veins you mysterious human
a feeling stuck between a sponsor and god

Delusions

Carried a single branch inside my river,
downstream through milky lashes,
tattooed lips and deceitful thighs.
We are unreliable and cruel like the water.
Carried you into goodbye fingers
of spicy savage lickers... carried you
like a burden... like a shameful secret.
You are the life, and I am the delusion.

Do you know me, or I, you?
The irresistible melancholy of the miracles
that have soiled the currents ruptures
like stardust above the greatest cycle of life.

Time will eventually trot away
like dogs on parade. Love will scorn
like the mundane minutes of a lifeless day.
Without the right words to say,
the right hip sway, I am not
the right person to convince you to stay.
I can only promise you that I will hate you
just as much as I love you today.

Eastbound Train

On the last train from the city that night
she sat across the aisle and talked
about sex-having saints.
Her voice dripped fire-
like tobacco juice
into your ear; nothing has hurt
as good since. You watched your fingers pick
sultry, Spanish notes
from between her damp breasts;
but when the train stopped at Twelfth Street,
you got off; left her sitting there.

Long ten blocks from home,
your hands played
with more than the loose change
in those deep pockets—the clinking
and clanking; the squeaking
of soles pressed into sidewalk.
Red light signaled;
the CLOSED neon sign
in the laundromat's window,
your final answer from god. You unlocked
the door and kissed your wife hello.

Afternoon

on the phone with you
a door creaks

in the room of your life
you are alone
receiving
sad ghosts of our own

are you tired yet of copper-tasting
doubts
never been nicked
like a bloody hangnail
never been caked
by a wild
woman
coiling her tongue down
the depths of your throat
like a leviathan

La Peti te Mort

Every night, I die. Traces of you in the grooves
of our mattress. The things we caressed have lost
their memories of us; why can't I? Lost
are: Sunday morning wrestling matches,
pillows tossed to sink into the floor without
a sound; hide-and-seek games with bodies tender
like bruised apples—under chaotic blankets,
the heat of you made my skin blister; punctured
fingers meshed against the frame's brass lips; forgetting
daylight, toes curled together whispering secrets.

Baby, look at what I've done.

I raised you from the dead, shaped each finger,
each toe from the red clay of my bed.
Chiseled out a heart, pulsed it with fever. I forged
your ribs from iron and inflated your chest with light.
I made you love.

Look at what I've done.

I created you and made you love.
I was only a goddess on the mountain top
in need of fantasies, but the gods believe
in nothing. I didn't hear you pray when you sank
into emptiness—the kind that shaves you off
like pieces of ice, chipping away until you found
a shape to fit. I dropped you into the shallow
shade; you collided with tectonic plates.
Your body glided like magma, pulling you out
from where your feet were fixed. I made you
 love. I made you, Love.

In the Kitchen

she weeps
peeling back layers
of a purple onion

but it isn't the onion
that makes her
weep

it's the earthly fragrance
of newly oranged
terra cotta urns gathering
cobwebs in the yard

their walls chipped
brittle as fiery crab legs
their emptiness
hollow as conches

Spanish Kitchen

I've been lost here before—
back pressed against cracks
on the seafoam wall, lifting cold impressions
like fingerprints. The floorboards whined
from the weight of you carrying me—

carrying me again
as you did the day the dog died, the same day we buckled
my mother into the backseat of the jade sedan,
afraid to make eye-contact in the mirror,
but nervous about turning our backs on her.

We handled her
like a bag of green apples; handed her
to nurses dressed in minty whites. My mother groaned
denials. I swallowed her moans like a mouthful
of sour apples. She added cracks to my walls.

I split into halves that day,
the way apples and walls do; you carried me
like unchecked baggage out the sliding door.
There was a dog dead on the teal tiles in our kitchen,
with a crack in its head like the cracks on the walls.
What else could I have done?

Time moved faster
between seafoam walls—my thumbs pressed
into the cracks, unable to merge with the green.
I drifted down the emerald-lit corridor—
two black pans hung next to a black
spatula like heads next to a spinal cord—
how out of place we were.

Calls of the Seasons

Three hundred seven nights have given way to daylight while I wait
to grow older than you. Tea turns warm water green
in yellow mug. Raindrops cling to shingles.

Dust in the doorway where you stood watching me dress—
shoulders wide as travel trunks.

Your boots, still molded to your feet.
Your voice plays on the answering machine even when no one calls.

Evening comes, I sit at the café where we met:
your features on faces I don't know, wine rouges my lips like a kiss
left unreturned, wind caresses my bare legs.

Nights grow long as lines spread outward
from my eyes like winter branches—lines your fingers once traced,

lines your lips once chased. You are the wrinkles
in cold sheets twisted around my body.

Like a wild goose flying against the calls of the seasons,
you linger; wait for me.

Defining Love

I only need a moment—
a moment to come into my own,
a moment
to free from this space
that lives between the somber shadows
and laughing lights.

I only need a moment—
a moment to detangle myself
from the cherry blossoms
of childhood,
in order to become the woman
who stands before you now
with white plums
in her wrinkled hands,
asking again for forgiveness.

I only need a moment—
a moment to rediscover
the paintings of my heart,
the dandelions and dragonflies—
just a moment longer
to recognize... memorize...
the beauty in your brown eyes
when it's reflecting mine.

I only need a moment—
one simple moment,
to recall
just exactly why,
and exactly how it has become
that I am the woman you've sworn to love.

Anymore

The ocean breaks through me like I am not worth drowning.
I am thin like water washing away soot—forming
dark blues that sprout from the salty bottom—spraying out
in mournful mist. I am without feet, without toes, without

little sexy hairs that stand on edge when you touch me
the way you once did. But you do not touch me anymore.
You do not look; you do not see me as I have been
anymore. You stare through me like I am not worth loving
anymore.

Good Intentions Are for Fools

Earl only reads National Geographic for the brown,
exotic, naked women whose faces and breasts ooze natural,
sexual energy. Good intentions are for fools.
Sixty-two years with the same woman, the same face,
the same scent, and the same sex that wilts
like lonely irises in the night, he deserves something
more than this morbid stillness of dead, tired bones.
No one told him life was going to be this way.

The cactus storms pin their thorns upon his shadow,
which fades slowly down the last stretch of road.
Maybe, just maybe, all the rulers and gods are wrong.
Maybe, just maybe, the ocean begins where he stands
and the solstice, sun and equator are just points on points—
and after sixty-two years of leaving his dreams on the mat
outside the door, maybe, just maybe these hot tears
were the long awaited rain of a new birth.

When Morning Comes

Quiet the talking, lover, give me my say.
You enter through my mouth and scoop out thoughts.
Your tongue already killed me once today.

I'll tell our story in my own simple way:
the bunched-up sheets, the epic battles fought.
Quiet the talking, lover, give me my say.

Too tough to digest, thick as hollandaise,
your words stick to me like beans burnt on a pot.
Your tongue already killed me once today.

My belly exposed—seared, roasted like a braised
tenderloin; what's left to say, caught in your knots.
Quiet the talking, lover, give me my say.

Firm hands on hips, we wrestle night ablaze;
when morning comes you'll tell me all I'm not.
Your tongue already killed me once today.

If only nighttime stories could last till day—
without warning you change, rewriting plots.
Quiet the talking, lover, give me my say.
Your tongue already killed me once today.

Sunday Bathers

I want all your Sundays—
naked on the sofa Sundays, locking toes and counting aloud your freckles.
Accidental moans from your mouth skirt my lips. I say,

I want all your Sundays—
ten more sit-ups, chicken salad wraps, dog-chasing relays;
give me your nose to trace, your hair in my face, your story from every angle.

I want all your Sundays—
naked on the sofa Sundays, locking toes and counting aloud your freckles.

A Small Death

We've been dying from the moment
we came together, peeled; bodies curved

like two damselflies connected head-
to-tail to form the shape of a heart.

As our middles inch together and merge,
flesh fills in gaps between skin surfaces,

suppressing the passage of light. Pressed flat,
our abdomens create their own moist

darkness. Blind arms like wing-flutters,
stroke the air warm. You, a water lily stem,

rooted in rusty mud, break the tension
in the water's surface to claim your freedom.

I scale your stem—my colorful ascent;
but there's no freedom in the rise to love,

only freedom in letting go and falling.
We are condemned to impermanence

like rainbows clinging to dew-soaked,
membranous wings, every time a small death.

Objectified

I can imagine the possibility of discovering a foot
inside every lost shoe scattered on the side of highways,
or washed up like coconut heads on storm-beaten
beaches: a legless foot adding to the collection of legless

feet without matching mates. Somewhere a mound
of feet grows. Feet torn off; feet unglued, unhinged
from bodies like steel beams from bridges. Feet left
to cultivate barnacles, left without function, without

true purpose; corns and blisters merging into a single
mindless lump that holds no memory of distances
traveled, of burdens carried, of time spent with other feet.

Yes, when you look at me as you do, I can imagine all
the possibilities of my being reduced to a lost foot
in an old shoe dragged ashore by shrimp and crab.

Reduction

I'm always shocked by her beauty
 when she's leaving me,
like having a spider crawl
 into my mouth while I sleep.
Her high heels scuff the wood floor,
 which has suffered
the brunt of her leaving before,
 but I've never stopped her.
The door closes, the furniture
 absorbs her scents, crimson
velvet curtains drawn across
 the windows... ah, gravity.

Things lean, they touch like hairs
 reaching into crevices, collecting
time—objects with names no longer
 attached to them.

Das bett, nuestro nido, il n'existe pas.

 What language should I speak?
My tongue doesn't know
 the sounds it makes.

I remove things from the boxes
 they came in, put them back
in places meant for other things:
 objects without labels thoughts
without feelings she without me without
 ties to the clock tracking time.

Reincarnating the Lizard King

Paris hotel. Daylight eats the curtains, penetrates
like heat from the spotlight. Fever
sits on your mouth, forcing kisses.
A new stranger's aftertaste sticks like failure.

You can't see your own face,
not the one she sees when Eros and Death collide.
She doesn't know you in the present.
Speed of light—everything you are
is inside her past like the lingering glow of a dead star.

The gods suck immortality from your fingertips.
You can't read your own thoughts.
Trapped in the present,
you dream of a rock star's life—
tight, leather pants with thoughtless zipper unzipping
for the girl at the bar slurping margaritas and stars.

You can't decide between promises,
incoherent lyrics or frenzied melodies—
the numbness of gin your mask,
cigarette smoke your scarf.
Suede cowboy boots discarded, belt buckle glimmers.

At the foot of the bed,
morning makes demands, but you are not
the Lizard King reincarnated. *Tell me, girl, who do you love?*
But you know she already doesn't love you.

Cactus Dawn

Baby, I'm inside-out, growing chickpea
eyes everywhere, even on the bottom
of my blistered feet.

Friday when I woke
from a dream—I can't remember—
I thought you were gone, chasing Diego
the Rooster into another cactus dawn,
shadows peeling off your shoes.

By the freeway I found your suitcase,
three black socks, and those Miller Lite
bottle caps you love so much,
and that old ladle.
You told me your Mama gave it to you before
you died, but we both know you're still alive.

You said to me the sun rises golden black
in my eyes, and the desert wouldn't be dried
if you had a hydrant to spray the dust
with the croaking of horny bullfrogs.
You said that

your Pa only spoke in dead
Indian tongues, and he never made *real*
words for you. But the sun is still rising
pink and dry, and Baby,

I'll get with you
when I'm done sorting out this life.

Hellyer Park

There was no moon that midnight, bitter gusts sliced
through winter branches. We were
the only sign of life. Heavy fog lay
across the damp field; creek
water flooded mud banks. We, creatures of the wind,
escaped from the halos
of city lights and hid our naked selves
under the apple tree.

But Timmy was a romantic. Arms stretched
eyes shut, he fell backwards
on the picnic table—splinters dug; clothes tugged;
red mane caught in my grip.
I mounted him the way Napoleon straddled
his horse Désirée—face
thrust skyward, chest puffed with emperor's pride.
He yielded the same way
Rose apples yield when pressed; I took the first
of Timmy's everything,
the only first that would always matter more
than all his other firsts.

* * *

On a moonless winter night, Timmy took
his life. I remembered
how I knew him when we were only seventeen;
Timmy touched my core—
his earth-brown eyes that saw me as winter's
only goodness. Should I
have loved him more? I shouldn't have left him
in the wind; but like blossoms,
we scattered, lost to the pink at sunrise.
I should've warned Timmy then
that our darkest winter nights would never again be
spent giving or taking love.

Catching Crawdads

The days were still warm when I biked
down to the Mercado Latino for a piece of liver. You know
that place on Seven Trees with the *caliente* stock girl.
Back in those days—those sprinkler-jumping
summer days when I was twelve—
I could hear the entire East Side right outside the window.

Kids kicked soccer balls in the street,
moms whispered stories on front porches (you know Delores's
old man took to that ugly green couch with a torch),
and dads waxed their Rivas on brown lawns,
talking about the good old days
when they were jocks
and ass-loving ladies' men,
the Clovers played on my dad's tape deck ("I took my troubles
down to Madame Rue. You know
that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth.")

Yeah, the days were still warm when I biked
to the Mercado Latino for liver. I took my rusted organs
down to Hellyer Creek—that place with the wild leeks.
I tied the liver to a string and waited
for the crawdads to sing. First my parents said,
don't eat things that eat meat; then they said, don't eat
things with faces that eat other faces.
So I lit firecrackers and stuck them
in the crawdads' claws; blew them up like *Jaws*.

Then one day, for no reason, I took the crawdads home,
rolled them in cornmeal and fried them up
like *chimichangas*. We sat around
that night laughing, sucking on their faces.

Ester

They call me Ester the Molester,
and that's alright. I've been a *puta* all my life.
Daddy, I'll take what you got hanging between them legs;
ain't nothin' else warm

you can give
I can't get

from a fifth of Jeremiah Weed.

I got two hundred sixty and a half pounds of hips; need
the feel of a man pressed flat
like a *quesadilla* under me.
Barbeque Joe's been dead a long time,
thirty years today,

but that don't stop him from comin' back,
grabbin' my ass night after night.
Mama, give me some lovin', it's cold where I've been...
from his skunk-oil hair to his bare rooster feet, ugly mean
even before his face burned
black like cracked peppercorns.

But ain't nothin' he can do dead
that I don't already let
yous broken-down-honkies 'round here do.

When we cremated his body, skinny
from too much black coffee, my four girls each took
a quarter of ashes like splittin' up
a dollar, nice and even.

Whatever they wanted to do
with their shares of the nightmare
was alright with me. I try to forget, but they remember
how he locked 'em in the bedroom, grinded
cigarettes out on their skins.

Ashes melted into their arms, coffee stained
the burns; but still,

I didn't say a thing... even when two of my girls came back
and buried their shares of ashes under the avocado tree
just to carry out Joe's final wish;

or when my other two girls poured him
into metal containers to keep
on their kitchen counters like cans of pinto beans
'cause they still can't let their daddy go;

or when the half of Joe under
the avocado tree comes back to chase me
'round again... even then,
I don't say a thing.

To the Man with Blue Eyes

I've never known a man wide as a tree.
Legs like birch trunks stripped white by winter.
Ginseng root toes mangled from wear.
Chest scarred,
the color of wheat fields,
yet he smears like wet ink when we touch.

No strings bind the pages of our love,
every word scribed in pen
as if love has earned
a place of permanence.

No.

Love
is the launching into the world of paper boats,
bleeding colors, soaking up more
than we can hold.

Love
is a firefly in winter,
whose wings fall, like mercury, in flight.

No string ties me to days before
I knew his name,
but I repeat it now while breakfast burns
on the black skillet, still
sucking in air like an act of betrayal.

No voice to tell me, today,
I'm loved. No strings on my blouse
to pull undone. I put
his blue eyes back on the windowsill.
I count stars, every night, a different number.

How has he lived
thirty-six years without knowing
he needs me
the way a hurricane searches for land?

Rest Stop

Harley has great implants. Too bad she's a slut, so you can't tell who's been there before you. But she's not slutty for me, and that's the worst kind of slut; the kind that don't want you. *What's wrong with me?* I said. *I like the feel of rough love, J.D. If I want sweetness, I'll take up Mexican cigarettes and green appletinis.* I can't argue with that kind of logic, so I don't. I tell her, *My name is Morrison Black, no "J's" and no "D's," no matter how you spell it,* but she doesn't care. She wants me to hold her and pretend that I'm the man-version of that fifteen year-old kid she loved back when she didn't know better.

Sometimes I can't pretend the way Harley does; times like that, I have sweet Phyllis, like smoldering charcoal, waiting on the backburner. She's as real as the day is long. For a good time, call Phyllis at the Permanent Press Salon, and she'll fix you up right. She goes for the messed-up, lonely fellas. When I couldn't get it up, she said to me, *I'll call Fernando for you, Daddy. He does boys and girls, and he's always mighty grateful after he's done.* I said to her, real firm, so that there's no misunderstanding, *It don't matter how much I'm hurting, Babe, I can't wrap my head around that kind of a deal.*

I miss the wife but not enough to talk to her. I'm just saying that she could've told me, she didn't believe in monogamy before she got her hands on half of everything. She played me like a fiddle, that one. You can't tell me that ain't American of her. Women think that because I'm a redneck trucker, I'm as stupid as a cockroach—that I don't think about things; but I do. Nothing but roads and thoughts when you're covering so many miles. Sometimes I hate cement. The road circles on itself, who knows if it ends, and I get tired of moving dirt from place to place.

I could've been a blues singer, a country guitarist, or the guy in Paris who was caught selling Chet Baker's trumpet after Chet fell from the window in Amsterdam, only two stories up and still he was dead—all the good men are dead or trying to kill themselves. When it's your time, it's no use fishing for another chance, best to give in and call it a good try. But old Chet blew his horn till the very end, even got better at it, even after they knocked out his front teeth. I've never had a bad tooth, never found a use for surgeries.

All these women, cooing, flapping their wings and pecking their ways to the pent-house-view of the gutter. Their sour stench like cherry pies molding on the windowsill. And all these flies, too lazy to circle; but the pigeons keep bobbing their heads in that stupid way pigeons do. It's the same everywhere: some places have pigeons and others don't, but no matter where I go, this fly'll always follow the stink.

My Man Gone Now

took back everything he vowed gone
 down to Wetumpka down in Alabama
left on Tuesday afternoon in his Sunday shoes
his head red velvet cake color
his walk lamenting the delta blues
took his church-going shirts his work boots his Texas-size buckle

took back the darling's the baby's the honey's too
gone the North Carolina sweet tea in his voice
gone the country music in his eyes

she has him now
 peeled the green from his apple
 gave him what I'm not woman enough to grow
 noosed him with the cord that bind and sow

too late for me now
to sweat him from my skin
too late to brine these hands he kissed

Twelve Bar nights
Southern Comforts overflowed green glass rims
smooth and easy like loving him
I fell too hard too fast too late to forget now
mornings bent over the kitchen counter gone
buttermilk talks in bed gone

my man gone down to Alabama
left me to fetch lightning bugs in the southern rain
just to watch them die in the dim dawn

Blues Woman

Evil-hearted woman
with sticky, lovin' temptations from the Eden tree—
runs hot all night, won't let me be.
Big-legged woman.
Mud-brown woman with arms like thighs.
You got me hooked like wine,
but your biscuits get buttered by every able guy.

Shame, shame, rag-baby.
Shame on you.

Call for my baby, call for you day and night—
got to have my baby, my brown sugar bite.
But you've been messin' 'round
with every joker in town,
givin' out samples at the liquor store.

Throwing back your hair,
showing-off your horse, white teeth;
you don't come 'round here no more.

Shame, shame, rag-baby.
Shame on me.

You lay out till the night's gone,
come knocking before the rooster cracks dawn,
making sweet demands
for saucy romance.
All stirred-up, I let you in. Roll the dice,
ride the Coltrane ride till your lemonade gone dry.

Evil-hearted woman—
homicidal woman with hot, greasy lovin'
like bacon. You move
like a hurricane, but you melt like lard
in my hands.

SECTION 2

Poetry Reading

--outside Martin Luther King Jr. Library, San Jose, California

On that afternoon, I was one
at a table for two. Sunlight still hadn't reached
the sidewalk; gloom collected around ankles;
the movement of people drowned out
bird songs. Behind the microphone, the poet spoke the words
you've sent in silent emails—
infrequent now,
your messages have thinned as our distance stretched.
One year four months and twenty-one days,
I've been adding them up,
while you've been counting them down.

The poet's voice rose and fell
with noises from the city: "Don't forsake me.
Don't marry another. Don't hate me
for leaving you."

"Marine... Iraq... Afghanistan..." I lost track
of the unimportant words
in between those markers. My mind drifted, finding you,
as it often does. *Honey, what if I die?*
How should I have answered you then,
sending you off
to be without me?
How do I answer you now,
when I can't let myself repeat this question?

At the corner of Fourth Street and San Fernando, I held myself
back, concealing
all the ways a poem can hurt me.
My heart beat independently like a severed
lizard tail that still fights,
not realizing its disconnection from life.

You were here once—
at the restaurant across the street,
hunched over at the bar sipping rum; I was intoxicated
by the warm
smell of molasses peeling off your skin,
by the way you looked at me
as if you were happy

just to be looking at me—cradling my palm against your lips,
Could you love a man like me? But you already knew my answer.

The motorcycle engine roared,
the truck horn blared, the airplane released thunder
into the gray clouds,
but I only heard you say, *Things are terrible here.*
Say that you'll still love me after what I've done.

But there are times when I can't picture
your face anymore. It doesn't take courage to be left
behind, to fall asleep in my own bed, tracing
familiar finger tracks across unfamiliar backs.
There's no armor needed for the trek to the grocery store,
no combat training for the act of writing poetry.

And the wind went on howling
through the microphone; and the sobs
of sirens rushed in and sped away. What do I have
to say about war and violence? Nothing.
Middle-aged women gossiped on the sidewalk, their voices
like the chatter of small birds.
It all came to nothing.

Marking Time

Your absence

in the heaviness of wood
and screws that form the shapes of stools and windowsills.
Your prints on dinner plates, your voice echoes
at the bottom of coffee mugs.

From the evening news,
I learn that bees are dead and no one knows why.
Dinner at the café, a nun in lacy bra and fishnet stockings
recites poetry. These stories I collect for you.
What stories would you tell me if you could tonight?

*Honey, today I shot a man.
I thought I wouldn't mind not living anymore.*

Late nights spent searching for your name on fatality lists. They don't keep them as current as they should, who ever these people are who spend their time compiling lists. How has it come to this?

The wallpaper cracks.
I'm missing you. Laughs shared over the bathroom sink
while you shaved; hugs turned into slow dances across
the bedroom rug; mornings with sounds of you breaking
open eggs—we found each other in everything.

Shapes of you are now missing—carve-outs of arms and torso from the bathtub, the orange reading chair; empty spaces where I

still expect to find you stretched like sugar candy over everything I touch.

Letters from Iraq

1. Solitary Man

for fourteen years
the only control I'm allowed
is my breath without

geography my life
in stasis spins
like helicopter blades

each day ends
the same with purple sun and sweats
red stains the desert floor

colors trickle
little-by-little but
only beige touches my head

2. Trouble Was

no one died today
all I did was wait
for death to rise from the sand

trouble lingers trouble is
the dark heart of this place
at the end of all

our conversations
I return to Al Anbar
still wanting to walk with you

down Music Row
on the West End of Nashville
show you how I still have a face

3. Beer and Baseball

I miss so badly
the smells of Miller Lite and red dirt
seventh inning stretch

having room
to extend and sleep
with unbent knees

instead I endure
warped minutes
ready to jump to my feet

to answer
rifle explosions
the desert suffers

4. Honey

you sent me off
to pick another fight
preoccupied with you

round shoulders
bare calves heart beating
like fluttering wings

mouth like bee hive
warm against my chest
how can I go on

pulling triggers
when there's you
signaling the way home

5. In the Light

I love you

when you read poetry
your voice your tongue your lips

there's dawn's light
and there's you
people are killing each other

in the light
but each night
I return to the sounds

of you slipping off
my sand-bitten boots sliding
warm hands under my camo

6. Tonight

there's only you with me
at this sidewalk cafe
I long to touch

your kidney bean hair
make you promises of love
but I'm raw as blisters

ground into dust
waking alone on sweaty cot
sand in my mouth

callused hands
groping the darkness
for something to hold

Living with Photographs

her daring sad eyes
no longer enough to bring me back
this bitter land
she cannot understand

there is no place in this sandpit
for recollections of love
I carry her
like my bullet-proof vest
sixty pounds heavy
metal plate linings
god-defying protection
for my fragile heart
her weight presses against me
waiting
my life pulsates
in muted
half
increments

we cannot practice the same religion
cannot laugh under the same sky
in her valley there is
persimmon-color sunsets
in my desert
dawn is always
pomegranate bloody
I let her go out of arms
out of reach

it has to be enough
to love
this woman
without
ever again touching her

Sleepwalkers

1. Only Dreaming

I saw you in Fallujah, falling.
Your torso bruised black, scratched by blue medals.
Was it a beast attack? I asked you.
You answered, *No, Honey, just one more day I owe.*
Your voice echoed like firefight. I woke
from dreaming to find you gone. You left trails
to lead me out the window. I fell, falling back,
staring at your green-lit sky.

2. Falling Asleep Again

Our love grew a head with elongated ears; they twisted
into a rope, coiled around my womb.
Caught in the chapel again without my clothes, I said.
The head smiled at me from the bottom of my throat,
a toothless smile that showed no memories.
My stomach protruded. It knocked over “stay away
from the edge” warning signs.
You were faceless, crouching on the cliff, fingers thinning
like saltwater taffy. We reached and stretched
ourselves shapeless, but always
the ears lay coiled and silent.

3. Crossing off Days

I had to complete circles, lose consciousness,
savage my childhood for you, I cried.
Inside my stomach, a traitor shifted, forecasting death.
You were too far under sand to see the Pacific
sucked away. Our kite-flying days faded in gypsy light.
You picked fires like flowers and planted rifles
along the roads. Hot bullets shot down the blue in the sky.
I was only dreaming that your body stirred under mine.
Put your fingers in my mouth, and I'll give you
mine, you said. *I'm sleepwalking with loneliness tonight.*

Why Have You Been Gone So Long?

1. Seventy-Four Hundred Miles West of Al Anbar

and thoughts of you like black birds pinned to ash-gray sky, unchanging caught in flight. At night by a cool window, I count pages, each scratch another second passes slowly by,

recording moments, touches, words—soft sounds, like fruits, fall from trees to sweeten my thirst. I stack memories like inked papers, unbound: page one, airport parking kiss, our first;

page thirty, arms around my waist like vines while you imagined our life; twenty pages later, your palm prints grazed across my thighs, by page one hundred, you were gone to wage

your war. We pressed to believe every lie we're told; my note to you read, *Monster, don't die.*

2. Three Thousand Miles West of Cherry Point

I watched dawn's towers buckle. Like a pebble, you launched westward, you came to rest your head along my waist-ridge; here you settled. Sand eroded from windswept dunes while we fed.

I'm older now, having written these lines, having loved and missed and left, having built monuments from one stray pebble. In time, we'll meet in the middle—skin covered in silt

to match the shades of your warring days. I'll lay my body down in the earthbed next to yours. We'll sleep holding hands while budding vines spray under our backs; but for now, for nine months more,

I'll question the ways this love could go wrong. *Why, Monster, have you been gone for so long?*

Ritual Prayers

Another day, another brown-faced boy pulls down
stars and crescents, straps on bombs, and leaves
his house to meet God's enemies.

Another day,
I fall into step. I can't tell you why one life
matters more than another, why the world stirs
for the death of one man while the bodies of others
are forgotten.

Another day, the taking of lives
is what I know. My kills weigh heavy like legless camels—
dumb heads dragging useless bodies. God stares at me
sideways—blind as sand waves.

Another day
and I curl dry lips around hot metal; gunpowder bites
my nostrils until despair fades as all feelings fade
in the heat of daylight.

Another day I go on living,
trekking my way back to you—don't know when
I'll get there, can't say what kind of man I'll be.
I can only tell you that I'm still alive.

Another day
and this burnt, caked place, I take as my bride. I lay her
body on the soiled bed and wait for time to record another
day into its margins.

Another day, a brown-faced boy
marches towards God, he comes with his final word for me.
Another day. Another day. Another day.

Another day.

River City

--In Iraq, River City is called when a Soldier, Sailor, Airman, or Marine sacrifices his/her life in the line of duty. All communications are shut down until family members are notified.

There's only loneliness in a sandstorm. The morning sky
fades to black like night-ocean; dirt sludges the air. *I'm alive.*

I listen to her breath merging with the static of open phone lines.
Seven thousand miles away, I tell her, *you're on my mind.*

What am I doing to you? I love you like the Fourth of July. She waits
for news, for my voice on the phone line, telling her, *I'm alive.*

Clocks have no hands; days sag, slow crosses on the calendar.
Seven long months on the phone, I keep telling her, *Honey, I'm fine.*

I look into eyes that wait for the world to burst into flames, but
it's her taro milk lips that ignite the fires, telling me, *I'm alive.*

Coming out of River City, I have the devil riding my coattail.
Seven thousand miles away, I tell her, *you're on my mind.*

Leaving Fallujah

God might as well close hell down and stuff
the sinners in this pit. I live death every day
as courage stumbles over black, blistered feet,

walking blind miles down dusty roads, finding
nothing but dirt here. Ricocheting rifle digs
bruises into my shoulder. Calluses grow
like ant hills in the palm of my hands.

Two steps forward, I fall half a step back.
Each step takes me from her, but she hangs on
in the grains of sand that cling to my camo.

Inside my empty pocket is the only place
I can still hold her with these desert-washed
hands—faithless hands preserving the coldness
of metal cutting through skin like a sand storm;

hands that remember too much: the warmth
of her neck, the thinness of her fingers
curling like ribbons around mine, the scent
of her skin drifting through those autumn

California nights, when I lay with her arm
across my chest, forgetting places I've been.
The breath of her, the smell of her—I remember

too much; memories painted on bullet-sprayed
walls. I am a ghost marching among ghosts,
as transparent as a nightmare. Dust collects
in my lungs like a bandage, wrapping

each breath into a gift that I save for her.
She reaches for me with the way home,
my lifelines in her palm. She believes me
when I say I would be hers. She believes me,

but I am gone. Death lags behind me now
like a lazy shadow without a life source. God
might as well close heaven down. What's the use
in waiting anymore for an end to this world?

SECTION 3

Distortions

--*San Diego, California*

Good morning, Mister. How are you doing, Mister?

No reply.

They won't look you in the eye.

They stare at the sky,

still gray.

You keep your gaze on the horizon where steel carriers
are anchored to the edge of the bay

and the bridge that connects

to the island where men play war games. Say it:

No one is an island. But today, you're an island.

That's just how it lies.

Seeking the sunrise, you track the curve of the bay.

What is the heart

of the city? Decay.

The sky and water both gray; in the middle:

skyscrapers manufactured in various shades of gray.

You see a palm tree,

another palm tree;

palm trees are still green.

But everything else, the things

you can't wrap yourself around, are soaked in gray.

Where is the sunrise? You think

you'll sit and wait for a while.

You waited all night.

You swallowed the mist. You can't find the sunrise.

You think you'll sit for a while,

fade into the background,

listen for the roar of engines,

feel the thump of footsteps on your spine.

Birds don't sing here, too busy feeding.

They're charcoal with one black one tagging behind.

Are you the black bird,

the lonely black bird?

At the edge of the continent, the cold air is biting,
and you're biting your tongue.
Not a soul in the water.

What is it there for?
Not for swimming,
not for wading,
not for silently ending
a life. The water is solid.
The morning is having trouble finding light.

What happened to all the colors?
Why can't you wish
the sky blue? Somewhere men are dying,
children are killing,
while the ships in the harbor are playing hide-
and-seek with the truth.
They're silent
as the birds are silent. They're waiting,
not time yet to move.

Escape Attempt

Parking lots and billboards;
exhaust blurs
the afternoon, soft sun
like a warm yolk-
filled center, filtered light elongates
the pinched
faces of traffic-sitters.
Above Interstate 880, a 747
emerges—more bodies
to soak up the sunshine.

Rush hour, lane changes, forging
against the city's pulse.
Traffic crawls
on the other side, cement medium,
speed and walls supply
the illusion of isolation.
The engine whines;
hand out the window, palm lifts
and sinks as if without a mind.
Skin, taffeta;
fingers, kite tails.

Yesterday's news: the discovery
of a new earth-
like planet and its promise
of life forms—
the possibility of free will.
But thoughts depart and arrive
at daily tasks—
the goings and stoppings
of an automated life.
Dream language
might as well be prison-talk.
Fifteen hundred light years from here
is not enough to forget
the trappings of being human.

Golden Hour

--Pont Neuf

The sun, a clementine, peels from the sky,
as aging buildings feast on dying light.
At Henri IV's horse's hoofs, hungry pigeons
flap soiled wings while moss grows olive tongues

on mildew stones. Only one hour before
the world starts over, blackness stains colors
and blurs the edges of things. Everywhere
are statues made of skin, blank faces that wear

worn masks and eyes; faces covered by hats
and scarves; marked faces like windows, blank flat,
that open slightly after an evening rain
to air out trapped stale blackness. The panes

of laden glass moan; they call to me.
I don't want them to know me intimately.
Separating myself from the parade,
I spread like dirt collecting on the *quais*.

I float on the trumpet player's bruised lips
and swim in orange pools of notes, stripped
of meaning. *Écoutez-moi. Amiez-moi.*
No one. I linger on smiles, on *bonsoir*'s

and *ça va*'s not meant for me. I'm everywhere.
I'm everything and nothing. I lean and stare
over the edge where barges like beasts
of darkness groan, dragging their shadows like mist

across the river's surface; palms pressed on ends
and corners, centuries of touches tensed
under the stones' slick surface. Shocks, odors
that reach back to Jean-Paul and Fyodor

lay trapped inside the cracks. They fight to touch
me back. I'm caught, imprisoned in their clutch.
Then the moment passes, seeping into stones,
the stains of time; once again, I'm alone.

Chopin's Nocturne on Her Father's Red Violin

Wails from the hollow of a red violin—funeral song makes
heavy the arms and legs of weathered wooden chairs lined
in orchestral rows. Embers suck all the air out of the room.
Lonely as the warm doorknob, her red violin moans notes;

fingertips dampen memories. Her elbow slides back-and-forth—
the bow presses against old strings the way dried bananas
are stretched and left thin to dry by the side of the highway.
She remembers seeing them on bus trips to the South China Sea.

Salted and moistened with travels, his torso leaned against
the shaded side of her young body. His freckles, black
banana seeds, crawled onto her arm. She leaned her head
against his shoulder and counted bridges and canals—wind

swirls outside the clanking of the diesel bus. They sounded
like waves whispering into the cavities of battered boulders.
Poor rocks, she thought, better to be water when the world
held such sad sounds. His coffin, cold now—black lacquer

surface licked by mango-colored flames. Smoke deadens
music, seeps into everything the way water travels from the roots
to the tips of branches to make wood—wood, scarred by storms
and centuries, now frames the hollow of the red, violin.

The Hanging Family Tree

I was Januaried, Februaried,
Marched—father's furious footsteps felt lonely
down the hospital hallways.

I lunged forward;
skidded sideways—wrong decisions made all day.

Father watched and waited
six extra weeks for a son— hung his hopes on the fillings
in a sticky bun.

Five fingers fisted tight.
Five fingers reached for his to grab. Ten toes upright
like frantic crab legs searching

for the sapient sand. Two eyes opened, absorbed the sun,
but not a son.

Father took
a crooked look and said: I know
what to do to you—

dressed me
in dirty drags to imitate a boy, taught me to love
boxes instead of toys.

My skin map shrunk like a banana peel. I took rice paper, ink,
wrote peekaboo parts to cover the pink.

To Myself at Nine

I remember you:
 mud-colored eyes
taking snapshots of strange cityscapes—
 billboard faces sold you beauty
you couldn't afford, gilded sidewalks,
 sharp turns dead-ended
at a basement on O'Farrell Street,
 bare mattress on the living room floor
soaked up your dreams.

You, with savage toes, trapped in sweaty sandals,
 blistered like pride.
Second-hand clothes restrained—
 wildness stirred inside, stirred
like typhoon winds sweeping
 across the red clay of the Mekong Delta.

You, still learning to speak—strange sounds
 forced from your mouth like body
through a meat grinder: tongue stripped,
 jaws restructured.

You, once surged like tempest, suddenly,
 silenced like a bamboo jungle
on windless days, curving inward
 like the South China Sea.

You, who secretly scrubbed off skin
 for a lighter shade;
each flake, a memory lost,
 intently left behind.

That Last Day of Summer, 1983

And every year, your birthday marks the end
of summer. Dawn's fishing boats under floods
of orange hues, new sky with blue forcing through.
Your back stretches the weave in nylon chair

while your eyes search the horizon. At your feet,
I sit with head against your knee, still dreaming,
when the song begins. As the record player spins,
we watch the South China Sea wash back in.

C'est si bon, de partir n'importe où... Quiet,
our moment, like a needle tracking grooves.
It skips on scratches but somehow music plays,
brass voice uncurls words while trumpets resonate.

As the needle slides back to its starting point,
your palm pats out beats atop my head, and we sing
c'est si bon. It pleases you when I sing
your songs, repeat your words as they're my own,

and hum those melancholy tunes you love;
but I know your shadow won't always cover
this sand, and this moment will soon end. One day,
I'll grow into you, eyes fixed on that horizon;

off singing songs about times that never were,
and missing you on that last summer day.

The Burial

His surgeon's hands now smell of earth still fresh
and sweet. The hole he dug, a gaping mouth
that waits to feed, is silent like the flesh
he stitched. He drops two pink toenails, ripped out

from summer backyard Indian-cowboy play;
into the grave they float like mantis wings,
a moment of quiet grace before decay,
then swallowed as all dead and dying things.

He pats the dirt and waters down the mound.
"How will they grow?" I ask, waiting for vines
to sprout. Father takes warm mud and smears proud
lines beneath my eyes. "With courage," he replies.

And I know the time has come for tears to dry.
I learn to bury things, dead or alive.

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